

A Sweet Lesson Hard Won



Dorothy Still Danner, pictured here in 1933. Dorothy went on to author “What A Way To Spend A War,” a book about her wartime experiences and was honored in her later years by President Reagan.

BY DAN DANNER, N.CAL MARKETING MANAGER

Hard lessons are sometimes the most meaningful. And the lessons learned can be the sweetest. I recently learned, through a painful experience, just how wonderful a country I’m privileged to enjoy. I also discovered a heretofore-unknown level of pride and affection for those who serve the country in the uniforms of our armed forces. Sweet lessons indeed.

The hard part of the lesson was the passing of my mother, Dorothy Still Danner, at the age of 87. For her, it was a blessing as her health had been poor for several years and her life had become quite difficult. For my brother, sister and I there were the mixed emotions of gratitude that she would not have to endure the trials of her ill health and the sorrow at missing her. She was a wonderful and heroic woman.

In 1942, as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps, 28 year old Dorothy Still was captured during World War II in the Philippines. She remained a prisoner of war until nearly four years later, when a daring rescue saved the internees on the day before the entire population of the camp was scheduled to be executed.

My mother retired from the Navy a Lieutenant Commander, having been awarded the Bronze Star and POW medals. Her service made her eligible for burial in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. My family gathered in Washington D.C. for the funeral on August 31.

It was amazing to experience the reverence and solemnity of the honors accorded my mother. A Navy escort platoon in dress whites stood in formation and came to attention when the family arrived behind the caisson (horse drawn carriage for the casket). The Navy band then played a beautiful melody. Led by the Director of the Navy Nurse Corps, Rear Admiral Nancy J. Lescavage, the band fell in behind a color guard and the escort platoon in front of the caisson for the procession to the grave site. We walked behind.

At the site, the Navy band played another melody and the Navy Chaplain led the service. Off some distance from the site across the lawn the firing party of seven Navy men in dress whites and an officer stood out near a bugler. They fired a 21 gun salute and the lonely refrain of “taps” echoed over the serene and sacred grounds of Arlington.

A flag detail, with incredible elegance, folded the flags (my father’s ashes were being moved to Arlington and interred there at the same time) and presented them to Rear Admiral Lescavage who, with the chaplain, presented them to the family. An “Arlington Lady” then made her way down the seats the family sat in, followed by former POW’s, who laid 11 carnations on the bier, symbolizing the 11 nurses who had been imprisoned. Each offered their condolences to us and acknowledged the great lady who was honored that day.

For perhaps the first time in history, a deeply moving service followed in which another flag was opened by Navy Nurse Corps officers and, as it was refolded, the career of my mother was detailed and her heroic spirit honored. The flag was then presented to my family. The historic service is called “passing the flag.” It is customarily done when an officer retires. I understand that this was the first time it was ever done posthumously.

A reception was provided attended the services at the Military Service For America

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for those who Women In Memorial, at

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which I met many great and powerful women and contributors to the fine memorial for our women veterans. The warmth of the officers, the reverence of all the military personnel and the dignity of the ceremony and reception were simply incredible. I had never experienced so much pride in my mother or so much affection for the service she loved so dearly. Yet, as profound as this experience had been, there was still more.

We were taken on a special tour of the White House by the Secret Service and allowed into rooms the regular tours cannot enter. The office of Senator Larry Craig of Idaho arranged a tour of the Capitol for us. Jan Hermann, a historian for the Navy, led us on a phenomenal tour of the old Navy Observatory where, from the early 1800’s until after the Civil War, the stars were studied for Navy navigational charts. (Lincoln had been a visitor there during a starry night in the Civil War.) We visited Ford’s Theatre and the rooming house in which Abraham Lincoln died. A second visit to Arlington

followed with a tour of Robert E. Lee’s house. We toured the Smithsonian and at midnight on the night before my sister left, we visited the Lincoln Memorial and “The Wall.”

I had never before been to Washington D.C. Profoundly moved by the experience of my mother’s funeral and my newfound relationship with our military and the history of our Nation, I tearfully read the Gettysburg Address.

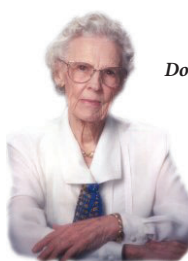
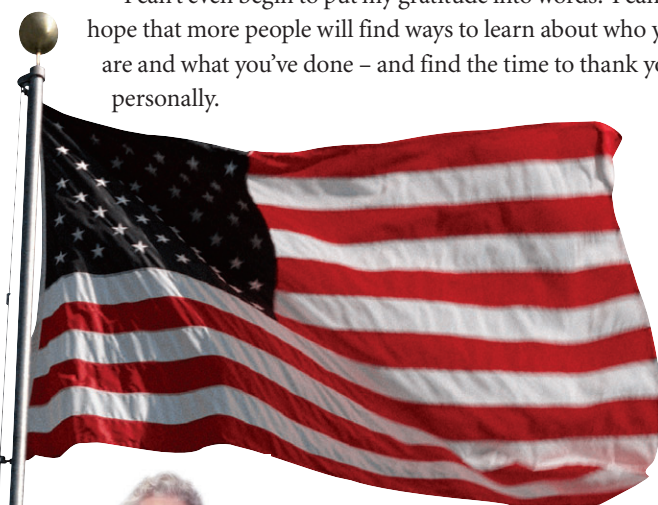
There in the deserted majesty of the Lincoln Memorial I experienced the deepest sense of

pride in our country I had ever imagined possible for me to feel. A midnight walk along the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, locating the names of friends and classmates etched into the reflective surface sealed the emotional evening and crowned what had become a pilgrimage.

I had always wanted to visit Washington D.C., but had left it in a secondary level of priority. Now, I would strongly encourage anyone and everyone to visit the Capitol and take the time to really absorb the miracles and lives which created this huge and magnificent country. I will certainly return.

I’ve heard people say after seeing “Saving Private Ryan” or “Platoon” that they wanted to hug veterans and thank them. This is my experience as well. And so, to all who have served and given so much to our country, consider this a love letter.

I can’t even begin to put my gratitude into words. I can only hope that more people will find ways to learn about who you are and what you’ve done – and find the time to thank you personally.



Dorothy Still Danner, 1996

And if you get the chance, pay a visit to the Women In Military Service For America Memorial at Arlington, you’ll see my mom there.